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ABSTRACT

When students do not write well in stressful situations, traditional instruction such as grammar exercises, sentence combining, and imitation of sentences will not be especially useful. Students are not often aware of their linguistic insecurity or of how insecurity affects language usage. The writing lab, however, creates an ideal setting for helping students regain their confidence in writing. For a writing lab to be effective, both tutors and students must realize that there is no one right answer, right sentence. or right rhetorical development for students to reach. Students also need to know the tutors well enough for the tutors to become authentic audiences for student writing. The opportunity for peer interaction offered by the lab is especially valuable, since peer tutoring is often less inhibiting than working with professors who might be insensitive to student problems. Lab activities such as timed writing or revising are effective in overcoming writing blocks because tutors are there to help with oral prewriting exercises. Tutors also have the chance to observe students write. A common problem among insecure students called blurred patterns, for example, often occurs when students stop writing within a phrase or clause to consider how they are sounding. When students stop writing because they are anxious, tutors can have them verbalize their doubts and remedy them as they occur. (HOD)

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Alleviating Writing Anxiety

in Individual and Small-Group Settings

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Thanks to research focused on writing anxiety by John Daly and others during the past ten years, we know a great deal about how writing anxiety manifests itself and what are some of its correlates. My own research, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, investigated the effects of writing anxiety on syntax and how writing anxiety correlates with age, sex, and socioeconomic factors. Though I will briefly summarize some of this research which is useful in diagnosing what I prefer to call "linquistic insecurity" (since it can be found in speech, hearing and reading, as well as writing), what I want to focus on here is how to help students help themselves to reduce their insecurity about writing.

When students do not write as well when they have an evaluative audience as they do in less stressful situations, traditional instruction such as grammar exercises, sentence combining, and imitation of sentences will not be especially useful. But unless tutors have samples of both kinds of writing from students, how are they to know that the problem is insecurity?

Sometimes students will tell their tutors the thought of writing makes them panic. More often, however, the students are not aware of their linguistic insecurity, and seldom aware of how their linguistic insecurity affects their use of language.

I developed an indirect elicitation test for insecurity which takes less than fifteen minutes to administer. A theoretical explanation of the test appears elsewhere,[1] but I include the test itself at the end of this paper.

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In part C, students more frequently mention problems with handwriting than any unit larger than the sentence, so I do not recommend using it for diagnostic purposes.

The choices in International Phonetic Alphabet for the first part of the test are listed below:

1)	a.	kʷɛtʃ	b.	kɛɪʃ
2)	a.	kəlizən	b.	kəlɪzən
3)	a.	təmeɾo	b.	təmeto
4)	a.	ɔfən	b.	ɔftən
5)	a.	lɪʃ	b.	liʃ
6)	a.	gradʒ	b.	gəradʒ
7)	a.	lɛnθ	b.	lɛŋθ
8)	a.	nu	b.	nyu
9)	a.	warʃ	b.	waʃ

Great concern need not be taken for dialectically non-homogeneous groups. For instance, insecure students whose dialects I know do not include "warsh" accurately mark that they say "wash," but decide "warsh" is correct, because they do <u>not</u> say it.

The second section pairs standard with hypercorrect, colloquial or non-standard versions of the sentences: the students check which they write to friends and which to teacher.

The test items indicate security if what a student marks that he or she says or writes is also correct or among the correct possibilities. If the student decides that he or she says or writes choice a but that choice b is correct, that would be an instance of an insecure response. However, in the cases in which the students indicate that they write or say more than one of the choices, for instance a and c, the item is marked as secure even if only one of these choices, for instance c, is also considered correct. In these

cases the students are probably recognizing that they can operate linquistically at several different levels of formality, at least one of which could be considered as being "correct."

If students have more than five items indicating insecurity, writing anxiety is probably contributing to their writing problems. My research indicates several problems which occur in students' syntax, for example, in a comparison of their essays and free-writing journals. As I mentioned before, traditional instruction is usually not the answer.

For instance, if students correctly use parallelism in journal writing but avoid it or use it incorrectly in essays, the teacher will not help them by presenting it in a formal, traditional way, as a new element of writing. A more useful tactic is to praise the parallelism in the journal writing, with a brief note about what created the pleasing effect. In this way, students learn one more thing about their "natural" use of language that is effective and useable in formal writing.

Instead, tutors must find ways of breaking through the insecurity to reach the students' competence. The lab is the ideal setting for this to occur, if tutors are aware of the students' special needs. First, the tutor must be aware of the affective factors of their interaction with the students. The key factor is for both the tutor and student to realize there is no one right answer, right sentence, right rhetorical development that the student is trying to reach. Rather than elaborate on this here, I refer you to Jay Jacoby's and Tilly Warnock's papers for this conference.

Secondly, students need to know the tutors well enough for the tutors to become authentic audiences for the writing. Rather than provide a large set of examples here, I refer you to the excellent case study Paula Bremer provided in her paper given in this conference. Paula began with her student Diane by establishing a point of common interest--track. This provided two advantages.

First, a topic the student is interested in creates engagement which discourages self-monitoring during the initial composing process. Second, they had a subject to talk about, which created an opportunity for prewriting talking. As Diane was encouraged to discover what she had to say and how to communicate it so Paula could understand, Diane began to internalize her own sense of quality, what seemed right and what didn't, and Paula reinforced her in this exploration. Diane then had her "right answers' within herself; she had more trust in her own judgements, lessening her need to self-monitor by some outside norm during the writing process.

We can help professors of insecure students be more sensitive to these problems. A 29 year old man with high linguistic insecurity who I had tutored shared his notes on a paper he got back from his intermediate composition professor. This professor is older, has a Ph.D. in medieval literature, and organizes his writing class on a classical rhetorical model. However, when he was clued into our student's special problems, he wrote the following in response to a less than adequate paper:

> I can see that you worked quite a time on your classification and division paper. If I can see this, you ask, why is it you have so many errors in the paper? This is not only a good question; it is the only question to ask. You, my friend, are trying too hard. You are trying to please me for some unknown reason, and you expect me to have such high standards that you are convincing yourself that you cannot reach them. To this I say just one word: HOGWASH! You are potentially one of the best students in the class, and it may be this very thing which is causing you problems. You have a secret fear of success. If you write a paper, I will be expecting you to write even a better paper the time after. Of course I will; I expect that very same thing now from you. In your first paper you wrote that you didn't want to waste your time in classes where the professors did not challenge your mind. This is an admirable idea, but do you think it fair of a student not to challenge his own mind. There should not be an idea of failure lurking there inside your head; there should be the idea that you can learn even from your mistakes. If I don't let you make mistakes, half your education is lost. I simply don't want you repeating correctable errors.
>
> . . .
>
> I wish I knew why you have this lack of self-confidence in your writing, when you have the potential for being an excellent writer.

Many of your writing problems may be ingrained in you because you have been doing them for so many years. It may take time and effort to eliminate them. I can appreciate that. For much of my earlier schooling I was afflicted with a vision problem where I read words and sentences backwards. By the time this problem was diagnosed, I had learned to compensate for it. The problem is still there, but I have not let it affect me. (Indeed I now amaze people with my ability to write backwards and to read books upside down.) You need to use what should be a healthy fear for your advantage.

Why am I preaching? Forgive me. I am just so positive that I have more faith in you than you do in yourself that I find it necessary to make you see that you should have no fear of succeeding. Amen. END OF SERMON.

I WILL NOT GRADE THIS PAPER UNITL YOU WRITE THE FINAL VERSION. HAVE AN EXTRA CHANCE ON ME.

Our student was very appreciative of his professor's understanding, and was eager to rewrite the paper and to write the upcoming term paper.

Peer interaction is another valuable asset in the lab for the linguistially insecure student. Peer tutoring is often less inhibiting than working with a professor. Not being alone but seeing others working on writing is often encouraging to the insecure writer, which is one reason I designed our lab with the majority of its space in an open room. Having the insecure student write to a friend who is working in the lab works well with students whose insecurity manifests itself in inappropriate verbage (often the older male.)

Timed writing and revising which are very effective in overcoming writing blocks are excellent activities in the lab, because the tutor can do oral prewriting exercises with the student first. The tutor has a chance to observe the students write: blurred patterns, a common problem among insecure students, often occur when students stop writing within a phrase or clause to consider how they are sounding. Are the students drawing their letters? This gives insecure students more time to self-monitor, so the tutor may want to work on the speed of handwriting. Also, when students stop writing because they are anxious, the tutor can have them verbalize their doubts and remedy them as they occur. For example, are the students stopped because they are unsure of a

spelling? The tutor can tell them to spell it well enough that they will remember what they meant; then, when the first draft is done, the student can look up the correct spelling.

Sensitizing tutors to writing anxiety is crucial. Anxiety may manifest itself in the same way as other writing problems, but it requires very different interaction between the student and tutor if it is to be overcome.

[1]"Linguistic Insecurity and Syntactic Complexity," Clearinghouse on Reading and Communications Skills, Fall 1981.

Linguistic Insecurity Test

A. Put the letter of the pronunciation of the word you use informally (with family and friends, not in school) under the column labelled 'I say' and the letter of the pronunciation which would be considered standard English (which might be used in formal situations) under the label 'Correct'. If you say both in informal situations, put both letters in that column; if you use neither, leave the column blank. If both would be correct, put both letters in that column; if neither would, leave the column blank.

	I say	Correct
1. catch		
2. collision		
3. tomato		
4. often		
5. leash		
6. garage		
7. length		
8. new		
9. wash		

B. Put an X in the column marked 'I write' after the version of the sentence you would normally write to friends or family. Put an X in the column marked 'Correct' after the version which should be written in a formal paper (i. e., for the English teacher). If you would write one sentence in both situations, put an X after it in both columns. If you could write any of the sentences in one situation, put an X after each sentence in the appropriate column.

	I write	Correct
1. a. Whom did you say was here?		
b. Who did you say was here?		
2. a. Were you surprised at my being here?		
b. Were you surprised at me being here?		
3. a. I like to go swimming as well as going skiing.		
b. I like to go swimming as well as to go skiing.		
4. a. The IRS is looking for you and I.		
b. The IRS is looking for you and me.		

	I write	Correct
5. a. I've got to see the doctor.	_____	_____
b. I have to see the doctor.	_____	_____
6. a. John's shirt needs ironed.	_____	_____
b. John's shirt needs ironing.	_____	_____
c. John's shirt needs to be ironed.	_____	_____
7. a. I was shocked by him arriving.	_____	_____
b. I was shocked by his arriving.	_____	_____
8. a. Politicians are so crooked nowadays, I don't know who to trust.	_____	_____
b. Politicians are so crooked anymore, I don't know who to trust.	_____	_____
9. a. The men who we met were very cordial.	_____	_____
b. The men we met were very cordial.	_____	_____

C. Answer these questions on the back of this sheet:

1. What do you think of your own speech?

2. Have you ever tried to change your speech? What particular things about it?

3. What do you think of your own writing?

4. Have you ever tried to change your writing? What particular things about it?